

Zhou Documents

10-1995

Review: Juggler of Systems

Wei GUAN 关伟

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/zhoudocs>

Recommended Citation

GUAN 关伟, Wei, "Review: Juggler of Systems" (1995). *Zhou Documents*. 93.
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/zhoudocs/93>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Zhou Documents by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

Juggler of Systems

Moving between visual cultures has become a way of art for the Australia-resident

Chinese painter Guan Wei. From concerns about the impact of environment to notions of treachery, Guan moves confidently in his work.

By Judy Annear

Guan Wei came into prominence in the West within a few years of leaving China in 1989 to live in Australia. He took up a residency in Hobart at the Tasmanian School of Art fully formed as an artist having been schooled in the traditional arts of his class—Guan Wei is the son of an opera singer and the grandson of a Manchu bannerman—and having trained as an art teacher in Beijing in the early 1980s.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) occurred during Guan Wei's school years and when that period of upheaval was over, another period—which has been described as "gluttony"—began as the doors of China slowly eased open to the West and information on the art of the 20th century around the world rushed in. The information did not fill the vacuum but overlaid existing traditions and conventions—the opportunity was created for experimentation and individualism in art practice on a scale unknown for some generations. By the late 1980s, Guan Wei had found his own distinctive style and subject matter. The vertical canvases in numbered series: increasingly bright flat colors and a negation of expressionistic brushwork; the use of a single figure shaped like an overgrown cartoon-like baby sitting behind a table directly opposite the viewer as though engaged in conversation or a demonstration of some arcane activity. Often there are taller series of paintings where the canvas is divided into two or three parts horizontally and figures, objects, environments play out complex interactions to do with exchange, dexterity, balance, comprehension: here animate and

inanimate worlds become involved in experiments with coexistence.

Guan Wei began to use acrylic paint only after arriving in Australia. In China his work was largely in oils and darker, not only in color and tone, but also in the

distortion of the figure which appears in all the paintings. While this figure is invariably simplified, those which appear in the earlier works are akin to the depictions of ghosts in East Asian traditional painting and border on the grim caricatures of an

artist such as George Grosz. For Guan Wei, environment and its impact is important and it is inevitable that in the greyness that is Beijing he should use darker colors, whereas in the bright flat light of Australia the work assumes a parallel warmth. There is not the intention of one environment being better than another, not that one is home and the other is not. In 1991, Guan Wei wrote about his philosophy and sense of place in a text published by the University of Tasmania, Hobart, entitled "Wo" *De Yishu* (*The Art of Idleness*): "...although my little patch of turf is a tiny one and not particularly comfortable, still it's mine. Once you have gone to 'nest' on your own little patch of earth for a while, you get sort of fed up and want to wriggle your toes a bit...the most brilliant nest and hardest to cleave is the one found in the jungles of steel and concrete. For here what you eat and what you shit are the same rarefied manna; 'concepts'... this is not that different from the monks of yore, though you don't see anyone today coming up with pastoral poems or landscape paintings as in the past."

The fingers of Guan Wei's figures are always the most defined—delicate, pointed, dancer's fingers—with the dexterity of the artist, the game player, the musician. There is an expressive delicacy which is added to when the pale lumpen figures are depicted with mouths—these are



Guan Wei, *Wunderkind No. 2*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 87 x 46 cm.

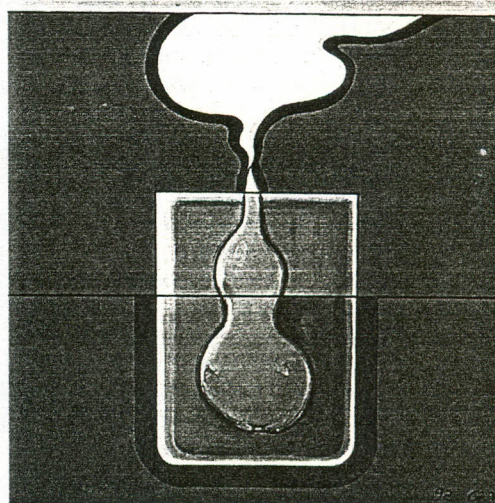
always akin to the sensitive sea anemone. The mouths and the fingers are often animated in such a way that a sign language becomes a prominent force in the works: the signs of gesture, desire, gratification, and need, identifiable regardless of the culture one has come from.

Guan Wei has always been prolific and the three series completed in 1995 exhibit a further brightening of his palette, particularly *Treasure Hunt* which is a series of 20 panels, the majority of which are shown together in pairs. An enlarged drug capsule is the treasure and the panels tell many tales of generation,

traveling, and animal, mineral, and mechanical attempts to find and grasp the treasure. The landscape is identifiably Australian and so are most of the animals depicted. The attempts to take the slippery treasure are rendered elegantly futile. The efforts of the hunters are laughable even when bullets, bombs, and poisons are used. There is not a sense of failure in a series such as *Treasure Hunt*, more a sense of wonderment mixed with irony and amusement. While the treasure is found but not sensibly utilized, it is also clear that there is uncertainty as to whether the "treasure" is beneficial or not. This ironical take on the desires inherent to human activity pervades both *The Last Supper* and the *Efficacy of Medicine*.

In *The Last Supper* series, the 13 figures behind the table are each depicted with the familiar elegant hands, mouths, and lumpen bodies. The capsule appears too, as does fruit, a variety of cocktails, and small creatures. The "mixed drinks" and drugs of both Western and Eastern origin imbibed by the disciples ostensibly depend on belief in order to work but the even belief structures cannot ensure that they will. The act of betrayal implicit in *The Last Supper* is of fundamental importance to Christian thought and Guan Wei has used this potent moment perhaps in order to communicate his ideas more explicitly to his Western audience; the figures are his regulars but there are shapes above their heads which can be seen as haloes, their internal organs—those associated with bringing in air, food, and drink—are outlined on their chests. As with many of the artist's series, the idea of *The Last Supper* came later and by chance after he had begun to work. It is his strategy to encourage a synthesis of emotion and rationality in his work as well as ensuring that his work is not isolated from its environment wherever that environment may happen to be.

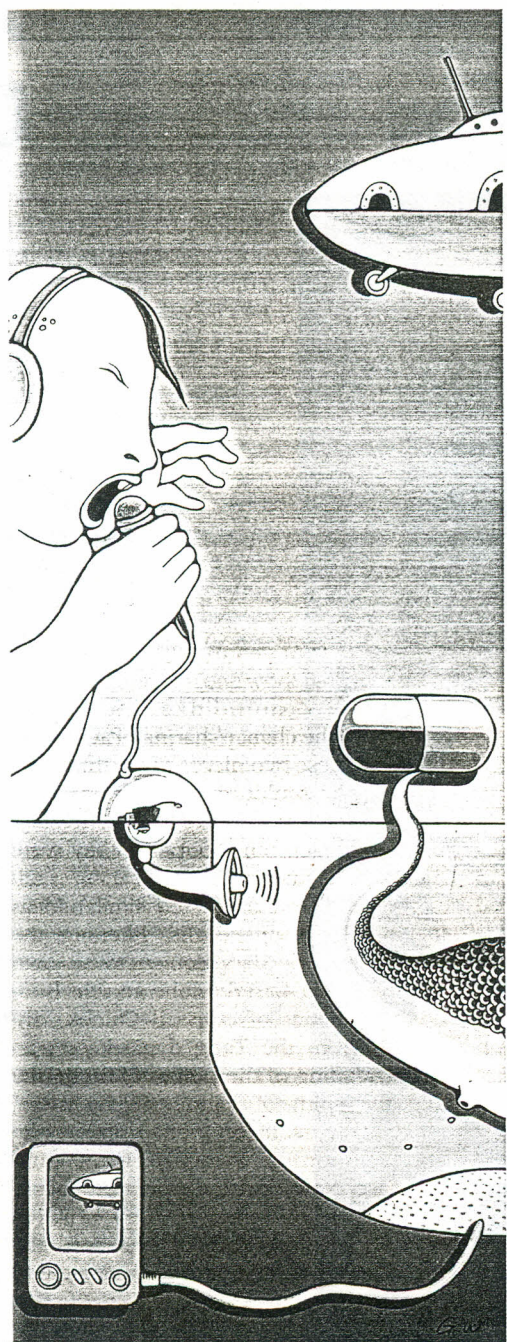
What is the net result of activity the paintings seem to ask? As there is so much happening within the works are there any results? Does the audience understand the message? It is this latter question which most assails Guan Wei who remains intrigued by how to communicate a



Guan Wei, *Test Tube Baby No. 2*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 127 x 48.5 cm.

synthesis, not only of emotions and rationality, but also of his Chinese traditions and Western influences. By using humor his figures and their activities invariably emanate a degree of the absurd, and continuing combinations of symbols which can be recognized by a variety of cultures (but not necessarily by all) Guan Wei becomes a juggler of systems, images, traditions, and mass culture obsessions in order to provoke thought and dialogue on the nature and fate of humankind. Δ

Judy Annear, a writer and curator in Sydney, curated Australian Perspecta 1995 and was Australian commissioner for the Venice Biennale, 1993.



Guan Wei, *Treasure Hunt 2*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 127 x 49 cm.